

Fikra Forum: Online Engagement Between the West and the Middle East

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Articles & Testimony

An in-depth look at the mission, scope, and growing reach of the Fikra Forum online community, highlighting its diverse contributors and their unique role in the ongoing, intense dialogue with the region.

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Born out of the political unrest that began in Tunisia in late 2010 and spread throughout the Middle East, [Fikra Forum \(<http://fikraforum.org/>\)](#) is a bilingual online community that seeks to generate discussions on social, political, and economic issues in the region, with an eye toward informing U.S. policy. As a project of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Fikra Forum's reach expands beyond that of traditional policy papers and research by engaging a much wider spectrum of individuals in the Middle East with a diverse range of views.

In the three years since its founding, this forum has engaged over one hundred different authors from across the Middle East, literally from the Atlantic to the Gulf, joining their American, European, and other counterparts in dialogue and debate over these issues. The direct audience is still modest, but it is growing; selected posts have been widely replayed in other influential online outlets, including the Huffington Post, the Atlantic, and the pan-Arab daily al-Hayat.

The range of contributors demonstrates that Fikra Forum has managed, in its own relatively small way, to break through a number of stubborn taboos in certain areas of engagement. Contributors include Turks and Kurds, Palestinians and Israelis, Salafis and secularists. They represent a veritable mosaic of regional religions: Sunni and Shiite Muslims, Christians, Druze, Jews, and more. Politically, writers include both pro- and anti-regime activists from countries around the region in transition or in turmoil: from Tunisia, on the successful end of the spectrum, all the way to Libya, Egypt, Lebanon, Yemen, and Iraq -- and notably also from Syria, which remains mired in full-fledged civil war. Perhaps most strikingly of all, participants in this dialogue understand that it is sponsored by a U.S. think tank known for engaging not just with Americans, but also with all the peoples of the Middle East.

REAL-WORLD EFFECTS

Beyond this effort at engagement in the virtual space, Fikra Forum has constructed several bridges to the real world. It has helped bring a handful of prominent Arab contributors -- from Egypt, Tunisia, Palestine, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) -- to Washington, D.C., for several weeks of intensive meetings, brainstorming sessions, and media exposure. And it has sent its American staff to those places and others, and also to Europe and around the United States, for parallel personal engagement.

The linguistic vehicle for this face-to-face engagement has ranged from English to Arabic, French, Hebrew, and a smattering of other languages. The venues have ranged from the halls of parliaments to the ivory towers and cafeterias of academe, from the White House to Congress to TV studios and beyond. The reception is usually cordial, even if the discussion is sometimes spirited, even heated. Overall, the feedback is encouraging. One e-mail comment captures the usual spirit of this engagement reasonably well: after a lively exchange between Fikra Forum's director and two dozen visiting Arab journalists, the organizer of their State Department-sponsored study tour wrote that "they particularly appreciated your candor, which they felt was in rather short supply elsewhere in their Washington meetings."

Unfortunately, not all the feedback is so positive. Fikra Forum's director has been seriously warned that it would be dangerous for him to show up at Beirut airport ever again, given his well-publicized views of Hezbollah. Some potential contributors have promised articles, only to have second thoughts as events in the region -- such as the 2014 Gaza war -- raised the emotional temperature to a fever pitch. More recently, and much worse, a Palestinian contributor ([Mohammed Dajani \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/view/mohammed-dajani-daoudi\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/view/mohammed-dajani-daoudi)) found his car torched in his East Jerusalem driveway on the same day he published a post entitled "[A Plea for Moderate Islam.](http://fikraforum.org/?p=6274)" (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=6274>) A Yemeni contributor was harassed, threatened, and finally physically barred from her workplace in Sana. Several Syrian contributors have been targeted by online smear campaigns in assorted extremist forums, both in the United States and abroad. And an Israeli contributor was singled out for opprobrium in a Syrian regime propaganda video entitled "Know Your Enemy."

Such incidents, whether positive or negative, offer evidence that engagement on Fikra Forum is noticed -- but also that such notice is not always an unmitigated blessing. Overall, however, negative reactions have been the exceptions that prove the rule. Spontaneous contributions from Arab authors are steadily on the rise, as is their apparent willingness to broach even the most controversial topics...

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